

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the First Lady

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For Immediate Release

December 12, 2014

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT GIRLS' EDUCATION CONFERENCE

Brookings Institute  
Washington, D.C.

1:14 P.M. EST

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you, everyone. Good afternoon. Thank you all. Rest yourselves. You've been doing a lot of wonderful work. I don't want you to get tired giving me a round of applause. (Laughter.)

Let me first begin by apologizing; I have a cold, so if I start to choke before you, don't worry, I'm doing just fine. (Laughter.) But it is truly a pleasure to be here with you today at Brookings. And I want to thank you so much for having me.

I want to start by, of course, thanking Strobe Talbott for that very kind introduction, but, more importantly, for his tremendous service to our country. And I also want to recognize Prime Minister Julia Gillard. It's wonderful to see you. You are a tremendous example of breaking so many barriers for women, not just through your long career but the work that you're doing on global education. So thank you so much for being here.

And of course, I want to thank Rebecca Winthrop for organizing this amazing group of leaders on behalf of girls around the world. And finally, I want to thank all of you for the outstanding work that you all do on global girls' education.

Now, I know you know that in recent years, this issue has finally come into the national and international spotlight. Celebrities are tweeting about it. Major corporations are funding it. Books about girls' education have become best-sellers. And really, all of that has happened for

one simple reason, and it's because of the passionate, relentless leaders' efforts, your efforts, the advocates and all of the young people who are working on this issue across the globe.

Long before I ever became interested in this issue as First Lady, you all were out there doing the hard work -- running schools in remote villages on shoestring budgets, taking on maddening bureaucracies, fighting year after year to change policies and laws. And you all were doing the painstaking research to show that educating girls is one of the most powerful things that we can do not just for girls and their families, but for their communities and for their countries.

And because of the work that you are doing, as of 2012, every developing region in the world had achieved or was close to achieving gender parity in primary education. And in a little over a decade, we saw nearly 56 million more girls going to school. Now, that is a breathtaking amount of progress in a very short period of time, and you all should be incredibly proud of the work that you've been doing.

But, as you know, when 62 million girls are still not in school, when in some countries, fewer than 10 percent of girls complete secondary school, then we know that our work is far from finished. In fact, in many ways, it's only just beginning. Because the truth is -- and you all know this more than anyone -- we're now coming to a new, more -- and important and challenging phase of this work.

We are beginning to confront those "second generation" issues, especially as they apply to adolescent girls. We may have more girls in those classrooms, but now we're stepping back and asking ourselves, are they truly learning what they need to know? Are we really doing everything we can to keep them safe? How can we ensure that they don't just start school, but they actually stay in school through adolescence, and then transition to the workforce?

Because we all know that this critical period -- when girls develop from children into women -- is when this issue truly starts to get hard. Because adolescence is often when a girl is first subject to the cultural values and practices that define what it means to be a woman in her society. And at that point, we really can't take on the issue of girls' education unless we are also willing to confront all of the complex issues that keep so many girls out of school -- issues like early and forced

marriage, genital cutting, beliefs about women's sexuality and their proper role in societies, and the very real economic disincentives that keep many parents from sending their daughters to school in the first place.

Again, as you all well know, these issues can become even more complicated -- make issues that are seemingly straightforward even more complicated for these second-generation challenges.

Just take the issue of safety. On the surface, the problem seems pretty obvious -- parents are afraid that their daughters will be attacked and sexually assaulted on their way to and from and even at school. Now, this is an understandable concern, one that any parent can relate to. But in many communities, parents aren't just worried about horrific physical and emotional harm to their daughter, they're also thinking about the harm to her honor. They're worried that she'll be considered damaged goods, unmarriageable, with no one to protect or provide for her, and then her entire future will be ruined. Those are the kind of stakes that we're dealing with on this issue.

And then there are the issues of quality and value, which are similarly complex. As you know, when deciding whether it's worth sending their girls to school, parents aren't just asking themselves, will this be a good experience for my daughter, they're calculating what those school fees will mean for their family's food budget, they're contemplating the loss of household help that is critical to the survival of that family. So they want to see real evidence that their daughter is learning real, marketable skills -- things like literacy, numeracy, vocational skills that will help her provide for herself and, ultimately, her family.

That's the kind of bar that we need to clear as we move forward. Because in our work to educate girls, especially adolescent girls, we're often asking families to do what seems to be in the exact opposite of their daughters' and their families' best interests. Often, we're asking them to change or disregard some of their most strongly held values and traditions.

So, yes, we need more infrastructure. We need more resources. And, yes, we need more good laws and policies -- those are absolutely the necessary building blocks for change. But we also need buy-in from those families and those communities. We need parents to actually believe that their

daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons, and that sending girls to school is a good investment for their future.

And that might take some real effort on the ground to actually understand people's concerns, to gain their trust, to determine what resources they need to make the sacrifice of educating their daughters.

So what we're talking about are the hard things like countless conversations, community meetings. We're talking about hundreds of hours spent training and empowering local leaders on the ground. And we're also talking about a shift in our own thinking so that we see families and communities less as a barrier to girls' education, and more as the source of the solution.

But if we really are going to be honest with ourselves -- and I've heard this from many of you -- while we often talk about the importance of community mobilization and local leadership, that's not always the focus of our work.

And there are good reasons for this. When you think about it, the truth is, it's risky. When you're new to a community, it's often hard to know who to work with. And then once you find the right leaders and the partners, you might not always see eye to eye on how to move forward.

And then you've got donor expectations -- they want a certain return on their investment, or you've got a reputation to uphold for your organization. So all this makes it not always so easy to go out on a limb and try something new.

Mobilizing communities and empowering local leaders can also be very resource-intensive. It requires staff on the ground who are willing to lead from the side and take their cues from local folks. So you need a lot of patience to work through misunderstandings and miscommunications. And you need even more flexibility around deadlines and timelines.

Now, this might not always feel like the most efficient approach, but every day, across the globe, so many of you are proving that programs that are developed and led by communities themselves can actually really transform girls' lives.

For example, there's a Population Council program in Ethiopia that convenes community conversations about the impact of child marriage and provides families with financial

incentives to delay marriage. And at the end of this program, girls were three times more likely to be in school. They were 90 percent less likely to be married.

Some other wonderful examples -- a program -- organization called TOSTAN. TOSTAN brings together communities in Africa to assess barriers to girls' education and other issues. And they work to develop their own plan of action, a plan that meets their needs and is in accordance with their values. As a result of this program, 7,000 communities have publicly announced that they are abandoning child-forced marriage and female genital cutting.

And finally, back in 1995, there was a group of Peace Corps volunteers in Romania who came together with Romanian teachers to create GLOW camps for girls -- GLOW stands for Girls Leading Our World. And the camp focused on leadership and career and life-planning. And today, just 20 years later, there are GLOW camps in more than 60 countries, and last year alone they reached 30,000 young people.

Now, we're fortunate that in a few minutes we're going to be hearing more about the Peace Corps' work on this issue from a panel moderated by Glamour Magazine's Cindi Leive. But these are just some of the wonderful examples of what works.

But of course, for all of the successes like these, there are plenty of failures as well. But here's the thing -- as I tell many young people, that's okay. Failure is good. In fact, failure is necessary because we're all in new territory here, especially when it comes to adolescent girls. And we're still figuring out what works and what doesn't work.

So we need leaders like all of you out there experimenting and innovating. We need you out there conducting rigorous evaluations and learning not just from your triumphs, but from your mistakes. Now isn't the time to be hesitant or risk-averse. Because as you know, so many girls across the globe are counting on us to be bold and creative and to give them all of the opportunities they deserve to fulfill their promise.

And right now I'm thinking about one of those girls in particular who I met a few months ago, a young woman named Mireille Muhigwa from the Democratic Republic of Congo. When Mireille was just around nine years old, rebel forces entered her community and attacked her neighbors, murdering seven children and their father. Mireille's family was spared. But on that day, she vowed that she would do everything in her power

to finish school and fight for human rights for girls' education.

Over the years, Mireille watched many of her friends and classmates attacked, gunned down, raped. But she kept on studying. And she finished college last year, the only woman in her class to graduate with honors. Mireille came to Washington earlier this year as part of our Young African Leaders initiative, and she addressed the spouses of the Africa Leaders Summit. In her remarks, she said, simply -- and this is a quote from her -- she said, "Today, I ask you to join me without any fear, because," she said, "fear is the little death." She said, "This day I ask the girls all over the world to take out the fear, and to take up the pens and books."

So here's what I think -- if Mireille could sustain her dreams amidst unspeakable violence, then surely we can sustain our focus on the fight for girls like her across the globe. If girls like Mireille can walk miles each day to reach their classrooms, and stay up for hours each night studying like their lives depended on it; if they can risk their lives just to go to school, like Malala did; if they can stand strong against all the voices that tell them they are undeserving of an education, then surely we can find a way to provide that education. We must. Surely we can give them a future worthy of their promise.

Because in the end, when it's all said and done, our challenges in doing that are nothing compared to the challenges these girls face. And if we can show just a fraction of their passion and courage and determination, then I'm confident that we can give all our girls the education they deserve.

That's why I'm here. Because all of you are already well on your way in this work, and it's wonderful. And I have learned so much from all of you, and I hope to learn more. I am inspired by you. Because of you, I am here. And I want you all to know that I am committed to this issue. I'm in. (Applause.) Yes, thank you.

So clearly, we have a lot of work to do. But in the coming months and years, I'm going to be rolling up my sleeves. I'm going to be using my voice, my platform as First Lady to support your work and lift up this issue however I can, however many of you find fit for me to fit in.

So this is just the beginning of our conversation. This is just the beginning of our work together. And I truly look forward to continued collaboration, continued inspiration and continued action in the next months and years ahead.

So thank you all so much and good luck with the rest of today. And I look forward to seeing you soon. (Applause.)

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1:30 P.M. EST

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